New documents boost JFK

By JOHN HANCHETTE
Gannett News Service

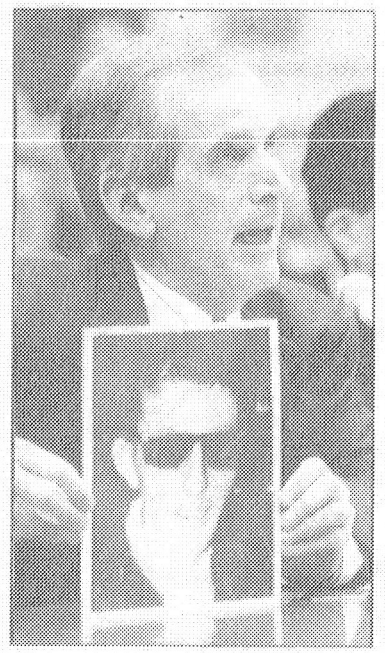
WASHINGTON — Researchers studying recently released documents held secret for 30 years revealed to a House subcommittee hearing Wednesday several mysterious events surrounding the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Some items from the 485 cubic feet of documents turned over to the National Archives since August in accordance with the new JFK open records law include:

■ The CIA, despite withholding it from the Warren Commission, was shadowing a Cuban-born American named Gilberto Lopez, whom they suspected of being a hit man for Fidel Castro. The agency lost him Nov. 22, 1963, but picked him up again when Lopez slipped across the Texas border into Mexico the day after the assassination. He made it back to Havana three days later.

■ Examination of original X-rays taken at the JFK autopsy led one private researcher to conclude Kennedy took two bullets in the head, one from the back, as the Warren Report said, and one from the front, which would mean a conspiracy.

■ Dallas police records show an alcoholic hobo named John Franklin Elrod was picked up Nov. 22, 1963, along the railroad tracks behind Dealey Plaza where JFK was shot. Later that day, Elrod was tossed into a cell next to Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin. Elrod told Dallas cops and the FBI that Oswald openly recognized another prisoner, named Lawrence Miller, as a fellow participant in a meeting between Oswald, Miller and Jack Ruby, the strip club proprietor who two days later killed Oswald. The FBI has denied Elrod was in the jail at the time.



AP/Charles Tasnadi

Former Senate counsel James Johnston presents a photograph of Gilberto Lopez during his testimony at a House hearing Wednesday on documents relating to President John F. Kennedy's assassination.

■ The FBI appears to be sitting on a 14-page report of an interview with Donnell Whitter, a mechanic who serviced Jack Ruby's car. A memo in the archives from Dallas detective W.S. Biggio cites the unidentified "auto mechanic of Jack Ruby" as saying Oswald had driven Ruby's car several times prior to the assassination.

These items are significant because they could imply a conspiracy in which Oswald and his killer, Ruby, may have been involved, something the government has denied for 30 years.

The witness who described the documents at a hearing of the House National Security subcommittee — Army Maj. John M. Newman, a veteran JFK author and researcher — said, "The greater the evidence of Oswald's contacts with intelligence agencies and underworld figures, the more difficult it becomes — though still not impossible — to sustain the 'lone nut' hypothesis."

Another researcher, James Johnston, former counsel to the Senate Intelligence Committee, said the CIA turned its leads on Gilberto Lopez over to the FBI, but said the new records show the bureau did not investigate thoroughly.

The documents, Johnston said, show the CIA became "immediately suspicious since the Cuban government appeared too eager to get Lopez out of Mexico" after he crossed the border at Nuevo Laredo.

"It cut through red tape and gave Lopez a Cuban courtesy visa, ignoring the fact that his U.S. passport had expired," Johnston said.

CIA agents in Mexico City on Nov. 27 photographed Lopez boarding the 9 p.m. Havana flight and wearing sunglasses. The documents show the CIA still considered Lopez a prime suspect as late as mid-March 1964.

Newman told the subcommittee chairman, Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich, that the possible Oswald-Ruby relationship held "troubling aspects," because National Archives cover sheets showed someone in power reviewed the vital Donnell Whitter report as recently as June and had it pulled from the new public file.

The 30-year controversy over how many bullets hit Kennedy's head was added to by Nashville radiologist Randolph Robertson, who claimed a new look at autopsy X-rays shows the "entry" wound at the rear of JFK's head was subsequently obliterated by a gaping exit wound caused "by a second shot from the right front, originating from the Grassy Knoll area."

Roberston says "at least two gunmen fired upon and assassinated President Kennedy."

conspiracy theories

Some files remain under lock and key

By JOHN DIAMOND
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Thousands of Kennedy assassination documents remain locked in government files and a review board for releasing them is months away from Senate confirmation, witnesses told a House panel Wednesday.

The House Government Operations Committee asked whether a new law designed to open the records is working.

Passed last year, the Assassination Records Collection Act required the president to name a review panel within 45 days to begin approving the release of secret documents. That panel is not yet in place, because President Clinton did not make final appointments until a month ago.

"Although part of the fault lies with the administration's delay in making nominations, it appears unlikely that the Senate will complete confirmation proceedings in this session of Congress," said Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., chairman of the committee.

James Lesar, head of the private Assassination Archives and Research Center, said only 10 percent to 20 percent of the Kennedy assassination records has been released.

Interest is intense. Since Aug. 23, when the Central Intelligence Agency's file on Lee Harvey Oswald was made public, the archives has handled some 2,000 research requests.